

## The Treatment of “Degree” in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*

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The General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* written by Geoffrey Chaucer has long been considered a striking picture of the varied types of people that made up fourteenth-century English society. One noted Chaucer scholar, Nevill Coghill, for instance, describes the General Prologue as a “National Portrait Gallery.”<sup>1</sup> This “National Portrait Gallery” theory seems to register the sense of miscellany. Coghill says that Chaucer “presented his characters in the jumble and haphazardry of life……in a deliberately disordered chain.”<sup>2</sup> But this is art, not spontaneous life. A literary art as accomplished and inclusive as Chaucer’s is more likely to be a result of deliberate order than of deliberate disorder. One possible approach to the order in which we meet the pilgrims in the General Prologue is to examine Chaucer’s treatment of “degree.” As I wish to show in the present paper, Chaucer presents his pilgrims basically in accordance with their social status or function. Whenever he ignores some of the subtleties of their social classification, Chaucer has sufficient reasons to do so. If he has not “set folk in hir degree / Heere in this tale, as that they sholde stonde,” (ll. 744-745) certainly it is not because his “wit is short” (l. 746).

It has been remarked that an Inn and a Cathedral were the only two places in England where representatives of many social classes would all be likely to meet on equal terms and a pilgrimage was the circum-

stance that could credibly unite them in a common purpose.<sup>3</sup> Chaucer himself could be on such a pilgrimage. Once he could place himself inconspicuously at the heart of his poem, he is ready to start.

The pilgrims we meet in the General Prologue are about thirty, in Chaucer's own words, "wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye, / Of sondry folk" (11. 24-25). They are not schematically representative of English society but seem to cover well enough the significant social elements. Perhaps the highest nobility and the lowest class of serfs are unlikely to travel in the fashion of this group, somewhat like the modern conducted tour for pleasure. Chaucer, therefore, starts out with the Knight, the warrior member of the landed aristocracy. Chaucer is very careful in introducing his first pilgrim because the Knight belongs to the same social class as Chaucer's sophisticated upper-class aristocratic audience. The Knight is presented as an ideal figure — sober, prudent, courageous, pious, "a verray parfit gentle knyght" (l. 72) indeed.

With the Knight appears his son, the Squire. A young probationer for the honor of knighthood is a natural enough association. The Squire is also an idealized representative of the same military class, only he is portrayed as less mature than his father. The youth's extravagance in dress and love-passion must be entirely delightful and becoming in the eyes of the upper-class people.

The third pilgrim, the Yeoman, does not possess the same social status. He is a personal servant of the Knight and a forester when not attending his master.<sup>4</sup> The gleaming silver image which he wears is St. Christopher's, who was the patron saint not only of foresters, but of many artisan classes.<sup>5</sup> The Yeoman is clearly a member of a lower class. The creation of the sense of verisimilitude must have

been in Chaucer's mind, for it was essential then that a knight travel with a squire and at least one servant to uphold the dignity of his office.<sup>6</sup> But at the same time Chaucer sees a profound distinction between the function of the Yeoman and those of the other servants who will be introduced later. So Chaucer presents his Yeoman here separated from the other servants. Chaucer, however, does not contradict the idea of social status: unlike the Knight and the Squire, the Yeoman is not characterized as an individual. He is a good soldier; his bow and arrows are nicely arranged. This is all that matters about his office. The Yeoman's individuality would hardly matter in the upper-class aristocratic circle.

After this knightly family comes the moderately important religious group. Again the highest prelates are unlikely to be there. The Prioress, the Monk and the Friar form a series similar to that of the Knight, the Squire and the Yeoman with respect to social status. Nuns in Chaucer's time were almost always drawn from the upper classes. Bowden argues that few women of the lower classes had either incentive or opportunity to become nuns. They either married young, their dowry being their ability to labor, or if they remained single, they were too valuable as workers to be spared from the household.<sup>7</sup> Thus we may assume that Madame Eglentyne has an aristocratic background. And yet the examination of her portrait reveals the fact that she does not quite belong to the upper-class circle. First of all, she as a prioress speaks French, but only "after the scole of Stratford atte Bowe, / For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe" (11. 125-126). The incorrect French of the English middle class seems to have been a standing joke. Moreover, this Prioress aspires to fashionable manners so eagerly. She "peyned hire to countrefete cheere / of court, and to

been estatlich of manere" (ll. 139-140). Who would need to imitate "cheer of court" if he is securely within the courtly circle? Probably her status is somewhere between the upper and the upper middle class. Thus Chaucer has made a subtle change in social standing as well as in functional order.

The Monk is not a prior at present but is likely to be one. This "fair prelaat" indulges in hunting, a sport proper for the country gentleman.<sup>8</sup> The Friar is considerably below the Prioress and the Monk,<sup>9</sup> although, unlike the Yeoman, he does not stand in a master-servant relationship with them. This Friar believes in cultivating relationships with the wealthy middle class, rather than the courtly people. For instance, "Ful well biloved and famulier was he / With frankeleyns over al in his contree" (ll. 215-216). He despises "sike lazars" and "swich poraille," but tries to be on good terms with the "riche and selleres of vitaille" (l. 248).

In this religious group, we see, together with the descending order in social rank, the varying attitudes toward their functions or vocations. The Prioress is far from irreligious. She may be too much interested in external appearances and her woman's "conscience and tendre herte" should be directed to the feeding of the poor rather than deflected to little pet dogs. These are, however, rather forgivable transgressions of her rules. The Monk's case goes a little farther. The Prioress breaks the laws of the external but the Monk breaks the internal. Not merely failing in the law of monastic poverty and chastity, the Monk flatly contradicts the unchallengeable authority of the monastic life:

What sholde he studie and make hymselfen wood,  
Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,

Or swynken with his handes, and labour,  
As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served?  
Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved! (ll. 184-187)

Yet if we consider this Monk only as a man, there is not much wrong in him. He is certainly not a good monk but not a terribly bad man, either. Worst of the three, Friar Hubert abuses, not merely neglects, his vocation for his own pleasure and greed. Here we have the first climax of satire. However, since the Friar is a gentleman and, with his theological learning ("he was lyk a maister or a pope" (l. 261)) and ecclesiastical powers, he enjoys considerable social prestige,<sup>10</sup> Chaucer's satire is more carefully expressed here than in the case of the lowest rogues like the Summoner and the Pardoner.

The next group is made up of what might be called the upper middle class: the Merchant, the Clerk, the Sergeant of the Law, and the Franklin. The Merchant must be involved in the national finances, as Knott infers from his secretiveness: "Ther wiste no wight that he was in dette"<sup>11</sup> (l. 280). In spite of his impressive appearance, this Merchant is not a very interesting person. He is the very type of commercial self-interest. Chaucer gives the shortest description of all the portraits presented so far—only 15 lines—while 62 lines are devoted to the Friar. And Chaucer tells us, "sooth to seyn, I noot how men hym calle" (l. 284). Although it is possible that Chaucer speaks of a literal fact, it may also be due to the prudence of a court poet who realized subtle relationships between his audience and powerful merchants. The traditional view that merchants belong to the order of peasantry and are to be regarded as of servile degree, no matter how rich they may be,<sup>12</sup> had changed by Chaucer's time. As Bowden remarks, "rich and poor, proud and humble, even the King himself,

all felt the power of the men who exploited the wealth of England, and who now indirectly controlled the national purse strings. Merchants in the later Middle Ages enjoyed a social position which..... exceeded that of many a noble.<sup>13</sup> After all, a court poet would not satirize too obviously and specifically the important person to whom a large part of his audience may owe money, even if the resulting portrait is somewhat dull.

The Merchant is followed by the two members of the learned professions: the Clerk and the Sergeant of the Law. At present the Clerk is not the foremost socially and clearly the least in prosperity. Chaucer introduces the Clerk here to provide an ideal by which the other three are to be judged. But this, again, is not entirely against the consideration of social standing. The Clerk can occupy a position of power and influence, whether in the secular or religious sphere, only if he wants to do so, although he does not right now and we know he probably never will.

The Sergeant of the Law is a pompous man of great learning. He is not a mere man of law, but one of a superior order of barristers. Sergeants of the Law were selected from barristers of sixteen years' standing. They were addressed in the King's writ by the polite plural "vos" and were not asked to remove their headcovering in the royal presence.<sup>14</sup> Chaucer's Sergeant of the Law must be a distinguished individual in his world but he may not be as "ful riche of excellence" as he believes himself to be or at least pretends to be :

Nowher so bisy a man as he ther nas,

And yet he semed bisier than he was. (11. 321-322)

The Franklin is in the company of the Sergeant of the Law. Their

traveling together must be an indication that they are social equals. Indeed, the Franklin seems to occupy a well established and dignified position in his country because of many public offices he has held:

At session ther was he lord and sire ;

Ful ofte tyme he was knyght of the shire (11. 355-356)

A shirreve hadde he been, and a contour. (1. 359)

So far Chaucer has been dealing with the pilgrims who might be actually familiar to his courtly audience: people of the upper and the upper middle class. Now he is to present the pilgrims who might be called the lower middle class. Before doing so, Chaucer introduces a bridge: the five Guildsmen with aldermanic ambitions. They are engaged in trades but are shaped for political office "for catel hadde they ynogh and rente" (1. 373). But their social importance seems to be very recent ("Ful fressh and hir geere apiked was" (1. 365)). This impression is strengthened by the snobbish ambitions of their wives (they would like "to been ycleped 'madame,' / And goon to vigilies all bifore, / And have a mantel roialliche ybore" (11. 376-378)) and their having brought a cook only "for the nones," probably to impress their neighbors. Traditionally craftsmen were regarded as belonging to the order of peasantry, just like merchants, and, therefore, as being of servile degree.<sup>15</sup> But in Chaucer's day some craftsmen, especially in the city of London, must have considerably moved up in social standing.

Then the pilgrims who engage in more humble work—cooking, navigation, weaving, parish work, agricultural labor—are presented. The Cook, the Shipman, the Wife of Bath, the Parson, and the Plowman, are all clearly identified as the lower middle class. Except for the

Cook, a link with the London Guildsmen, all the others are from provinces. To the eye of a court poet, provincial people may seem all the more lowly.

The only difficulty here is the presence of the Doctor of Physic. From our modern notion of the learned professions, the position of the Doctor seems to have been slipped. He should be way up with the Clerk and the Sergeant of the Law. But he comes after the Shipman of Dartmouth. The standing of the medieval leech or barber-surgeon would fit very nicely in this position. But Chaucer's Doctor is no country leech, nor mere barber who has acquired small surgical knowledge as an apprentice. He is a "Doctor of Physic"—a very difficult degree to obtain. He is a top man in his profession. He is familiar with the eminent authorities in medicine. Moreover, "he was grounded in astronomye" (1. 414). Robinson points out that that the "astronomye" means what would now be called astrology.<sup>16</sup> Now the question is, as Bowden raises,<sup>17</sup> how seriously the really wise scientists and physicians took the matter of astrology in Chaucer's time. Chaucer's own opinion seems difficult to pin down. But at least from the ambiguity of "praktisour" ('practitioner' but also 'schemer, manipulator') and the seemingly casual remark on the Doctor's study "but litel on the Bible." We may think that Chaucer indicates his Doctor is sliding into the shady area of alchemy.

Chaucer was careful with men of the Church but now he can place his irreligious Doctor wherever he likes. The Sergeant of the Law, another member of the learned professions, strikes us a pompous person to require prompt and full payment of every bill ("of fees and robes hadde he many oon" (1. 317)). But that is a legitimate charge for whatever service he has performed. Chaucer's Doctor, on the other



hand, is so fond of gold—"For gold in phisik is a cordial; Therefore he lovede gold in special" (ll. 443-444)—that for larger profit he resorts to the means which we can hardly approve of. Like the Friar, he believes in the "friendship" with those who are not quite equal to the dignity of his immense learning and skill. Moreover, he is quite ready to make money out of the public and private affliction of the pestilence.

Ful redy hadde he his apothecaries  
To sende hym drogges and his letuaries,  
For ech of hem made oother for to wynne—  
Hir frendshipe nas nat newe to bigynne. (ll. 425-428)

He kepte that he wan in pestilence. (l. 442)

Therefore Chaucer has kept back the third representative of the learned professions until after the Shipman, whose vocational skill Chaucer readily applauds but who has nonetheless his shady sides. The Friar excepted, we see the description of villainy for the first time in this Shipman:

Ful many a draughte of wyn hadde he ydrawe  
Fro Burdeux-ward, whil that the chapman sleep.  
Of nyce conscience took he no keep.  
If that he faught, and hadde the hyer hond,  
By water he sente hem hoom to every lond. (ll. 396-400)

The Parson, the most humble rung of the ecclesiastical ladder, is of peasant origin, as his flesh-and-blood relationship with the Plowman would indicate. These two seem to stress the perfect happiness that following Christ's teaching and accepting one's proper status in life can bring. I am not at all sure whether Chaucer's ideal portraits, the

Clerk, the Parson, the Knight and the Plowman, reflect, as Clawson maintains, Chaucer's "own admiration at a time of changing standards of the basic ideals of earlier medieval society, as they had found expression in its fundamental classes—the men of prayer, the men of war, and the men of labor."<sup>18</sup> At least Chaucer's position here is not different from the medieval aristocratic view of the lower class: humility and service is the way to happiness for them. As a court poet he might have felt it wise to conclude his presentation of each class in ordered society with the traditional social theory.

Thus the round of society has been completed. Yet Chaucer presents one more group of pilgrims. This last group is made up of five rogues. The Miller, the Manciple, the Reeve, the Summoner, and the Pardoner, are all characterized by their relationship with their masters. They are far from serving their masters wholeheartedly, which would mean to help maintain order in society. It has been pointed out that their position in the sequence is planned to indicate these rogues are outside of society, which seems to be the most acceptable interpretation.<sup>19</sup> Since this group of rogues represents elements outside of ordered society, Chaucer's focus is not on their relative social status. of these five the Reeve may be socially most important: he belongs to the administration of a manor. Yet he is not the first to be portrayed.<sup>20</sup> Chaucer views these rascals in terms of their functions and the ways in which they meet them: the ordering within this group depends on the increasingly greater importance of the position of trust each occupies and, accordingly, on the greater crime he commits by abusing it.

In the portrait of Friar Hubert, we have seen a carefully balanced satire on the abuse of his office. Now we have an open accusation. The Miller cheats with corn: "Wel koude he stelen corn and tollen

thries" (l. 522). His cheat may be considered less evil than that of the others because he does not defraud his lord, but only his customers, to whom he does not owe a special obligation. But the others—the Manciple, the Reeve, the Summoner, and the Pardoner—all cheat their masters. Worse than the Manciple, who cheats his masters "that weren of lawe expert and curious," (l. 575) the Reeve cheats his lord who has a claim to be served all the more faithfully because he is young and inexperienced. The Summoner and the Pardoner betray what should be even higher obligations. The positions of trust they occupy are not civic but ecclesiastic. They not only abuse their delegated powers for their personal gains but, even worse, pervert their masters' business. The Summoner, who "wolde suffre for a quart of wyn / A good felawe to have his concubyn / A twelf month, and excuse hym atte fulle," (ll. 249-651) cheats justice and morality ecclesiastical courts represent. He would teach a good fellow to have no awe in a case of the archdeacon's excommunication, "but if a mannes soule were in his purs" (l. 655). With his pardons that have "comen from Rome al hoot" and sham relics, the Pardoner makes fools of the parson and the people and "wins silver" so skilfully. The Pardoner, by his abuse of the power delegated to him, cheats the purpose of God and His Church, and endangers the very souls of men.

It must be noted that their swindling is not due to their being of low servile station, as indicated, for instance, by the Reeve's close-cropped hair: "His heer was by his erys ful round yshorn" (l. 589). The Plowman, of the same villein origin, is presented as an ideal figure. Nor is it simply the result of their being "laymen, hangers-on of the Church, and hated,"<sup>21</sup> as Coghill puts it. Except for the Miller, who is a kind of bridge with ordered society, all of them abuse their

function in a way that the personal servant (the Yeoman) and the craftsman-servant (the Cook) cannot. It seems that Chaucer believes opportunities for dishonesty are inherent in the very nature of their functions. Although being of villein origin, they were raised from the ranks of the lowest manual laborers, to those of salaried officials or upper servants, of a manor or an institution. Their income comes neither from landed property, nor commerce, nor knowledge, nor handicrafts, nor agricultural labor, but from negotiation, intermediation between their masters and people under their masters' jurisdiction. Obviously their callings furnish the widest possible opportunity for accumulating personal gains through graft. What gives these churls an "infinite moral and social depth"<sup>22</sup> is their peculiarly parasitic position in society.

Among this parasitic group Chaucer puts himself. The implication of this has been discussed by some critics,<sup>23</sup> but to go into this consideration is beyond the scope of the present study. It may suffice to attribute it, as Swart suggests,<sup>24</sup> to a modest convention not to be obviated, and to give Chaucer, as our observer, permission to stand aside. It may be partly due to the poet's intention to suggest to his audience that his cataloging will not last forever.

Thus, in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, we see an analysis of fourteenth-century English society, based upon the consideration of status or function, not terribly revolutionary—a court poet would always keep his audience's reactions in mind—yet very revealing of a society in which new socio-economic interests, commerce and industry, are just emerging from feudalism. After all, in spite of his apology for neglect of "degree," is it not Chaucer himself who strikes us as knowing enough about everybody's rank and order in a changing

society to be able to be a "marchal in an halle"?

## NOTES

- 1 Nevill Coghill, *The Poet Chaucer* (London, 1949), p. 116.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., p. 118.
- 4 The word 'yeoman' meant any sort of countryman of the middling classes, usually a famer, but sometimes a servant of any armed retainer. The idea that a yeoman must be a free landowner is very late; see G. M. Trevelyan *Illustrated English Social History*, I (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1964), p. 32.
- 5 Muriel Bowden, *A Commentary on the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales* (New York, 1948), p. 88.
- 6 Ibid., p. 84.
- 7 Ibid., p. 92.

It must be remembered that one needed a dowry to become a nun, too. Money must be paid to place a woman in a nunnery, where she was to be respectably settled for life. In this way the English nunneries were financed at least in part; see Trevelyan, p. 144.
- 8 In the fourteenth century the monks were rather well-to-do and no longer did the manual labor practiced by their predecessors. Maintaining many servants to carry on the daily routine of their establishments, the monks lived like country gentlemen, sauntering in the cloister or roaming the land dressed like laymen; see Trevelyan, p. 104.
- 9 Originally the friars, unlike the monks, lived by begging alms, had no property of their own, and preached the doctrine of evangelical poverty; see Trevelyan, p. 102.
- 10 The degree of Master or Doctor not only required a long course of study but also lavish expenditure of money. This made those who could afford to take it rank as very dignified persons. See Alfred W. Pollard, ed., *Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: The Prologue* (London, 1903), p. 56.
- 11 Cited in F. N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (London, 1957), p. 657.

- 12 Frederick Tupper, *Types of Society in Medieval Literature* (New York, 1926), p. 14.
- 13 Bowden, p. 146.
- 14 Robinson, p. 659.
- 15 Tupper, p. 14.
- 16 Robinson, p. 661, n. 414.
- 17 Bowden, p. 204.
- 18 W. H. Clawson, "The Framework of *The Canterbury Tales*," *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (New York, 1959), p. 13.
- 19 John Reidy, "Grouping of Pilgrims in the General prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*," *PMASAL*, XLVII (1961 Meeting; 1962 Publication), p. 602.
- 20 Interesting to notice, however, is that Chaucer takes pains to list all five according to their social standings once before going into their description :  
 "Ther was also a Reve, and a Millere, / A Somnour and a Pardoner also, / A Maunciple, and myself—ther were namo" (ll. 542-544). It seems that Chaucer does not entirely neglect social rank even in this antisocial group.
- 21 Coghill, p. 117.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 See, e.g., Reidy, p. 603.
- 24 J. Swart, "The Construction of Chaucer's *General Prologue*," *Neophilologus*, XXXVIII (1954), p. 129.

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